



Folk Art

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I have been collecting outsider and modern folk art for ten years, and it is rare that I see something that stops me in my tracks and activates that obsessive desire I felt when I first started collecting.

I felt this renewed sensation when I was first introduced to the collages of John Williams a few months ago. I remember vividly that first photograph I saw of his work—a collage of President Barack Obama. What struck me immediately was that the artist had used a pair of lips cutout from a now-unrecognizable magazine photograph of a pair of generic lips and placed them upside down to masterfully recreate the President's lips in one graceful pass. I could not wait to look at the other photographs and, with each, became more and more preoccupied with wanting to meet the artist and see the collages firsthand. I was lucky. Several months ago I did just that.

In a now-famous characterization, Andre Malraux once wrote: "Art is a revolt against fate." In this sense, John Williams, of Winchester, Mass., has been a revolutionary since childhood. As a young boy, he sculpted dinosaurs and dragons from modeling clay, inspired by children's picture books. Today, with a devotional zeal for minutiae, the 28-year-old creates complex portrait collages that provide a window to history and to his mind. Williams is autistic. For most of his life, his art has been the principal medium through which he connects to the world around him. Armed with an enhanced visual sense and a strong

desire to interact directly with his materials, Williams' art is the improbable and remarkable product of a lifelong struggle.

Life With Asperger's Syndrome

Williams' form of autism is known as Asperger's Syndrome. Believed to be a genetic condition, Asperger's affects roughly one in every 300 people. At its simplest, the condition limits the ability to read and understand social cues, in turn limiting the ability to engage others in communication. For Williams, Asperger's has greatly impaired his ability to comprehend and interact with those around him.

In his own words, Williams describes his world as chaotic. "Thoughts and images swirl around endlessly," he says. "I just can't focus, can't stay calm. But art helps me live my life. I can escape, and I can channel my energy into creations."

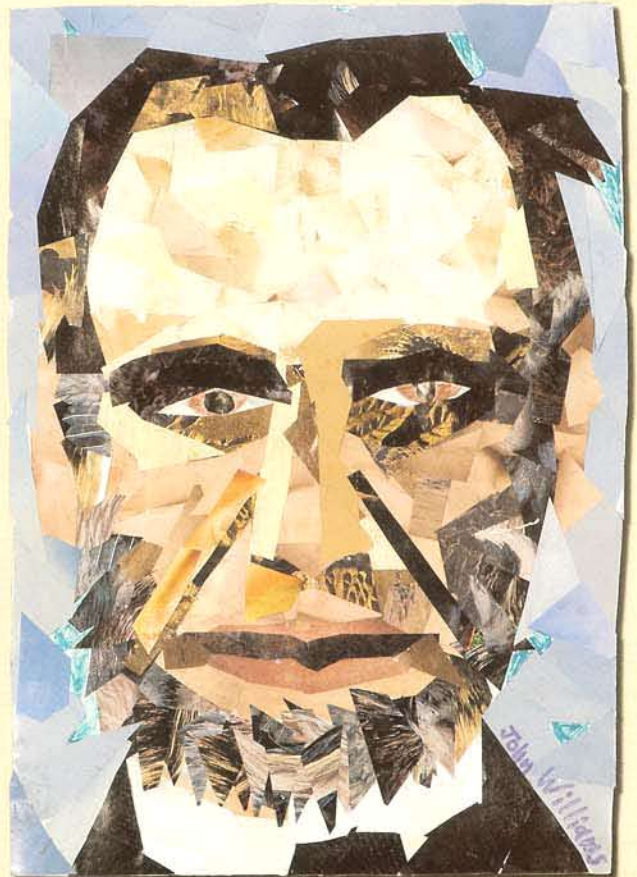
As a child, Williams discovered an ability to fixate intently on singular subjects, delving deep into intricate details with a nearly obsessive eye for thoroughness. The intensity of his focus helped to mitigate the often dizzying effects of the steady stream of stimulation in his mind, or as he describes it, "... like having a TV turned on in your head with the channel changer broken." He began with books of interest to children everywhere—exploring the worlds of dragons, dinosaurs and aliens.

Profile of an Artist: JOHN WILLIAMS

BY PAUL YANDURA

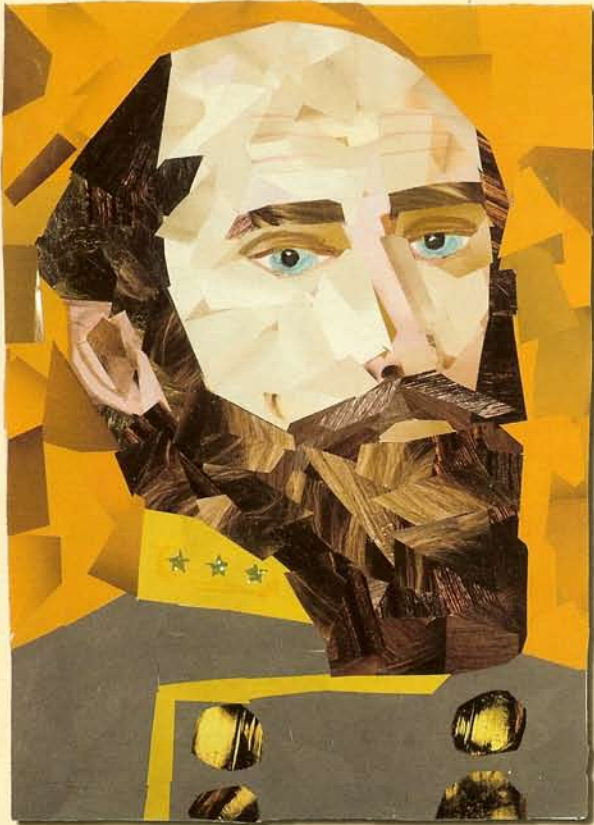


General William Tecumseh Sherman—The Face of Ambiguity



President Abraham Lincoln

Photographs of John Williams artwork by Murely Stuart.



General Richard S. Ewell

From the pages, he would extract a comprehensive and exhaustive level of understanding before transforming this newly acquired knowledge into clay sculptures.

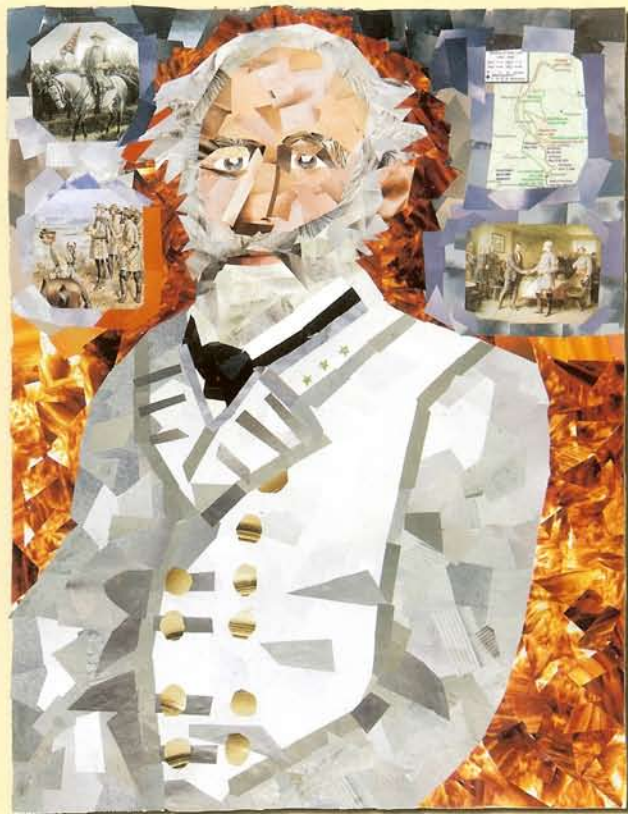
This intense channeling of attention isn't unique to Williams—many people with Asperger's Syndrome seek an outlet for expression. But as his interests have evolved, so too has his art. And what began as a coping mechanism has blossomed into an impressive portfolio of depth and historical perspective.

A Passionate Expression of History

To say that Williams has turned his attention to history perhaps understates the degree to which the artist is wholly immersed in America's past. He nervously recites details of the American Civil War with the accuracy of

a tenured professor. From the personal lives of military figures, to the precise positioning of particular units on the battlefield, Williams utilizes maps, videos, photographs and even field visits to devour every morsel of information he can wrap his mind around. "I try to focus on things that interest me and to think about how they help me to interact with other people," he says.

Eventually, he harnesses these details—complete with near photographic recall of speeches or conversations in which his subjects participated—and siphons them into collages that are unique, not only for their commitment to historical accuracy, but also for their original style and presentation.



General Robert E. Lee

As a young adult, Williams was introduced to collage through a course at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. "From my first project, I knew I had found something special I could work on," he recalls. Williams' collages have become his signature work. Primarily, he composes portraits of military figures and American presidents. Scrap by scrap, he assembles compelling multidimensional images that place some of history's most familiar figures in a light that reflects the artist's unique perception of emotion.

The process is laborious. Almost in a trance, Williams scours pages and pages of catalogued photographs, periodicals and maps for potential bits and pieces to include in his work, assigning to each parcel the same scrutiny he devotes to his subjects' life stories. The colors, the

texture, the shapes—consideration is given to every dimension. And with the constant hum of the History Channel in the background, Williams works tediously in his studio to portray his subjects in the context of their life's narrative, with particular attention to the emotion that he imagines the subject would be feeling.

Williams finds it easier to reflect emotions in his artwork than in real life. In his work, emotions are depicted through nuance and subtlety. The collage Williams created of General William Tecumseh Sherman is titled "The Face of Ambiguity" because it represents the complexities of Sherman's role in the Civil War. Sherman lived in the South prior to the war but is credited with

Today, with a devotional zeal for minutiae, the 28-year-old creates complex portrait collages that provide a window to history and to his mind.

destroying the South's will during his infamous March to the Sea. To reflect this dichotomy, Williams made half of his face black and the other half white. The background elements in Sherman's portrait reflect the fiery scourging



Sitting Bull—The Face of Tradition

of the South but also the North's heroic charge to victory. Likewise, Williams' portrait of Abraham Lincoln portrays him as a strong leader who survived many years of personal and political struggles. The cowlick in his hair and an apparent tear beneath one eye demonstrate his humanity.

In life, Williams has difficulty making eye contact with those around him. But in his work, Williams pays prolonged attention to his subject's eyes,

and in many cases the eyes of his subject actually look as if there is a real person staring at you through holes in the paper. The eyes, he says, are the most important means of conveying emotion. From the steely glare of a confident

Barack Obama, to the grave and determined stare of Ulysses Grant, Williams' subjects appear distinctly aware of the historic narratives in which they are enveloped.

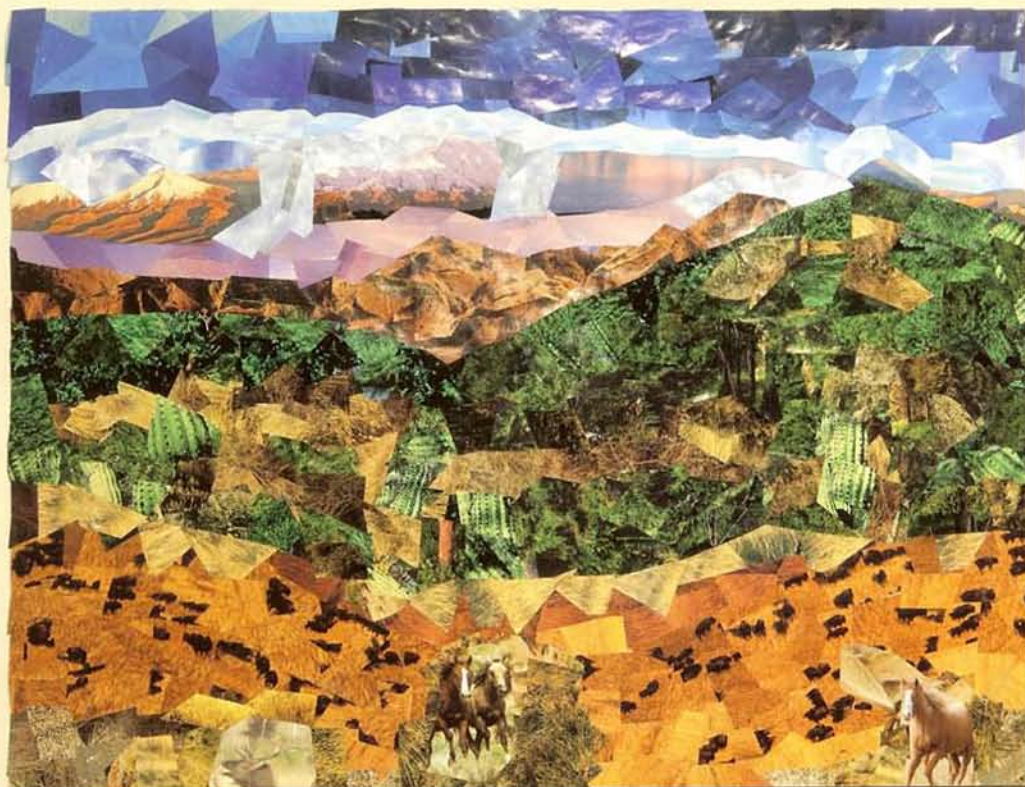
Eventually, Williams hopes to create collages of all of the military commanders of the Civil War and perhaps also all of the U.S. Presidents. Williams' collages allow him to express his passion for history and the enjoyment he gets from working with his hands. His collages allow viewers to gain a more complex understanding of history, and perhaps more important, they help us to understand how Williams sees the world, through the lens of Asperger's Syndrome. For Williams, the art has its own significance. "This is my refuge," he says. "It helps with my disability, helps me live. And if somebody sees something in my work, then I've made a connection . . . That's not something that has ever been easy for me to do." ❏



Ted Williams

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Home on the Range